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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether preservice teachers' understanding of collaborative consultation improves significantly during undergraduate training and whether they receive experiences working with other school professionals. The study compared the perceptions of 128 college freshmen with 130 college seniors at a mid-sized, midwestern university. Specific study concerns were students' knowledge of roles of multidisciplinary team members, understanding of consultation, and experience talking with school psychologists. Findings included: preservice teachers think they have a good understanding of their role in case conference committees and in deciding children's individualized education programs; seniors participated in more case conferences than freshmen, but their understanding of their role and the roles of others was not significantly greater than freshmen just entering the teaching program; the majority of preservice teachers felt they could work collaboratively with other school professionals, but fewer than 5 percent of seniors agreed that they had learned methods for framing problems to discuss with a school psychologist; 85 percent of preservice teachers had never spoken to a school psychologist, and many felt they needed a better understanding of their role in consultation; and fewer than 25 percent of seniors agreed that they were familiar with various consultation models. (Contains 13 references.) (SW)

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Collaborative Consultation: Are Both School Psychologists and Teachers Equally Trained?

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Introduction

Both the emphasis on prereferral interventions and on the inclusive view of least restrictive environment are increasing the time teachers and school psychologists work together. By working together, school psychologists and teachers can share their expertise to assist students with learning and behavior problems. One of the more successful ways of accomplishing this is through **collaborative consultation**, which is defined as "an interactive process that enables people with diverse expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually defined problems" (West & Cannon, 1988, p. 56). Such psychological consultation, first proposed by Pryzwansky (1974), does not assume that the consultant (here the school psychologist) is primarily responsible for the process of consultation, but instead that the consultee (teacher) shares equal responsibilities in all related endeavors. **Both professionals must define the presenting problem, agree upon the objectives, develop an intervention plan, and implement and evaluate its effectiveness** (Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 1991). Thus, collaboration is the key.

Despite the potential benefits that collaborative partnerships have to offer teachers, school psychologists, and students, it seems efforts to form such working relationships often fail. A few major reasons are proposed to account for this. First, demands to meet legally mandated deadlines often greatly inhibit the ability of school psychologists to expand their role to include consultation. For this reason, teachers' perceptions of school psychologists are often limited to that of "tester." Similarly, teachers' misconceptions about the training of school psychologists often undermines consultation efforts made by school psychologists. For example, when faced with a learning or behavior problem, teachers rarely consider working with a school psychologist as a preferable intervention or strategy (Hargrove, Duis, and Rothlisberg, 1994). It should be noted that even the professional vocabularies of each group are different, increasing the possibility of miscommunication (for example, school psychologists' use of the word intervention rather than strategy or adaptation).

Second, teacher training at the undergraduate level does not specifically prepare these educational professionals to work with school psychologists as collaborative partners. **Research has suggested that teachers' knowledge about consultation is positively related to the degree to which they initiate and participate in problem solving efforts with school psychologists** (Hughes, Grossman,

& Barker, 1990; Stenger, Tollefson & Fine, 1992). Johnston (1990), who was once a teacher and is now a school psychologist, points out that education and training are necessary to reduce the discordant expectations between consultants and consultees.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether preservice teachers' understanding of collaborative consultation improves significantly during their undergraduate training and whether they receive experiences working with other school professionals.

Problem Statement and Hypotheses:

1. Preservice teachers in their last year of training will not demonstrate a significantly greater understanding of collaborative consultation than do those in their first year of training.

2. Seniors will demonstrate no greater understanding of the roles of other school professionals than freshmen.

3. Seniors will not have more experience talking to school psychologists or participating in case conference committees when compared to freshmen.

Method

Two hundred and fifty-eight preservice teachers at a mid-sized, midwestern university were questioned about their perceptions of the role and function of school psychologists and their understanding of the consultation process through the use of a 30 item survey. Questions dealt with the students' perceptions of training as well as their expectations for interactions with various school personnel when dealing with instructional or behavioral issues. Data were collected early in the fall and once complete, a comparison of the perceptions of freshman (n=128) and seniors (n=130) on 10 questions was made using crosstabs and chi square analysis. These specific questions addressed students' knowledge of roles of the members of multidisciplinary teams, understanding of consultation, and their experience talking to a school psychologist.

Results

The results suggest that preservice teachers think they have a good understanding of their own role in case conference committees and in deciding children's individualized educational programs.

Significantly more seniors than freshman had participated in a case conference committee. However, seniors' understanding of their role and the roles of others was not significantly greater than freshman just entering the teaching program.

The majority of these preservice teachers felt they could work collaboratively with other school professionals. However, when asked if they had learned methods for framing problems in order to discuss them with a school psychologist, fewer than five percent of seniors agreed or strongly agreed. Furthermore, when asked if they were familiar with the different models of consultation used in educational settings and the implications each has for teachers, fewer than twenty-five percent of seniors agreed or strongly agreed. Eighty-five percent of the preservice teachers had never spoken to a school psychologist. Seventy percent of seniors agreed or strongly agreed that they need to gain a better understanding of their role in consultation in order to work collaboratively with a school psychologist.

Discussion

Despite the importance of collaborative consultation to the success of prereferral interventions and to mainstreaming/inclusion, most preservice teachers do not receive formal training in the area. As discussed by West & Idol (1987), the consultee's knowledge about the process of consultation is related to the degree of success in school consultation. The results of this survey suggest that preservice teachers do not receive such needed information in their training. Because "the consultative relationship between teachers and school psychologists is viewed as the key to successful classroom intervention for special needs children" (Johnston, 1990, p. 51), better training in this regard is needed in order to dissolve the existence and/or creation of faulty expectations for psychological service.

Several researchers in this area have pointed to the importance of preservice training in consultation for teachers. At the University of Austin, West, Idol, and Cannon (1987) have developed a curriculum for preservice preparation of regular and special education teachers in collaborative consultation. This curriculum involves supervised acquisition, practice, and application of more than fifty competencies that have been judged to be essential for collaborative working relationships (Idol & West, 1987). It is proposed here that such a model be adapted for the use of training teachers and school psychologists. A pilot study (Jackson, 1986) of a consultation training program set up to jointly train

undergraduate and graduate level education students suggests such efforts may have positive results. Jackson's (1986) curriculum "promotes problem solving, effective communication, constructive conflict resolution, effective perspective taking abilities and positive interaction among participants" (p. 48). All such behaviors are essential to effective collaboration.

Educators of teachers and school psychologists may become proponents of joint enrollment of teachers and school psychologists in preservice courses, practica, or workshops focusing on methods of consultation (Morrison, 1992). West & Cannon (1988) suggest that such training will make for an easier, more effective transition to actual school situations. By training together, Johnston (1990) suggests that classroom interventions/adaptations will be more likely to be carried through because teachers are more likely to have the necessary skills, and school psychologist are more likely to suggest realistic classroom modifications. **"It is at the preservice level of training that any professionals who will eventually be working together can most easily be trained together"** (Brown, et al., 1991, p. 237).

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